

FREDERICK VERNON COVILLE - FRIEND OF THE LIBRARY

An account of

his contributions to the early development of the Library's collections
and bibliographical equipment in the field of botany

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In the death on January 9, 1937, of Frederick Vernon Coville, Principal Botanist in the Division of Plant Exploration and Introduction, Bureau of Plant Industry, the Library lost a most valued friend. His career in the Department had been intimately associated with the development of the Library for more than four decades. He was born March 23, 1867, graduated from Cornell University in 1887, and came to the Division of Botany in the Department in 1888. Accustomed as he was to the library facilities at Cornell University, he must have been greatly disappointed to find the Department Library in the condition it was at that time. Its inadequacy will be evident from the following strong statement of the Secretary of Agriculture, Jeremiah Rusk, which appeared in his report for 1839:

"An essential to efficient work is a well-selected and well-stocked library, which shall cover all the lines of inquiry of agriculture and agricultural science. It is useless to attempt to do first-class work that shall pass the scrutiny of the sharpest criticisms without having at hand what has been done and said in the past and what is constantly coming in from a prolific press. Our library, of something like 20,000 volumes only, is specially weak in the Government publications, some of which are of rare merit; in the agricultural reports of the several States, for which there is a great demand; in general agriculture, without which no one can well treat agriculture historically; in foreign agricultural reports and publications, without which in these times of cosmopolitan thought and work no such library as ours is properly equipped, and in several lines specially needed by the respective divisions of the Department. All the divisions need strengthening. The library has but a fugitive volume or two of any herd book, and is so woefully lacking in many lines that I refrain from further specifying.

"In the change of the library from the old room, which was so small as to compel a suspension in a measure of the collection of more books and the rejection of the Government publications, it was, for want of help, badly disarranged, so that what we had was so difficult to find that it was almost a bar to any attempt to make a comprehensive study of any topic. A special effort* has been made to re-arrange and reclassify it, and we now hope for a more satisfactory use of what we have, and for an appropriation sufficient to fill up the gaps and place it on a proper footing."

*The special effort was the appointment, during the summer of 1889, of Mr. W. I. Fletcher, then Librarian of Amherst College, to come to the Department and prepare a classification of the Library, which was not only unclassified but also uncatalogued.

FREDERICK VERNON COVILLE - FRIEND OF THE LIBRARY
(continued)

The Library at that time was located on the second floor in the middle portion of the old red brick Administration Building. Adjoining the Library at the east end were the quarters of the Division of Botany. Mr. Coville had, therefore, ample opportunity for learning the condition of the Library, both as regards its resources and also as regards its facilities for making its resources available.

Another factor which contributed greatly to Mr. Coville's understanding and interest in the Library was the appointment in September 1891 of Miss Josephine A. Clark as botanical bibliographer in the Division of Botany. She was a graduate of Smith College, class of 1880, and had studied library work in 1888/89 in the first library school in this country, the one started at Columbia University by Melvil Dewey. Before coming to the Department Miss Clark had been Assistant Librarian at the Gray Herbarium, Harvard University. She combined a technical knowledge of cataloguing and bibliographical work with a knowledge of botany and her work had attracted the attention of Dr. George Vasey, then Chief of the Division of Botany.* In carrying on her botanical work she was closely associated with Mr. Coville and, like him, must soon have become aware of the condition of the Department Library. It was therefore only natural that their common interest in botanical literature and bibliography should later have led to important results in the development of the Library.

In March 1893, after the death of Dr. Vasey, Mr. Coville was appointed to his place. Six months later Mr. William Parker Cutter was made Librarian of the Department, the first librarian to be appointed under Civil Service. Mr. Coville and Mr. Cutter were born in the same year and both were graduates of Cornell, Mr. Cutter in the class following that of Mr. Coville. Having much in common in their background it was only natural that they looked at the Library from much the same point of view and cooperated closely from the beginning. In the four years from 1889, when the Secretary made his statement on the unsatisfactory condition of the Library, to 1893 there must have been much agitation leading up to the appointment of a trained librarian under Civil Service. Whether or not Mr. Coville had some part in it is not definitely known. It does, however, seem quite certain that Mr. Cutter learned through Mr. Coville of Miss Clark's training and experience and of her special fitness for work in the Department Library, for only a few days after his appointment as Librarian, Mr. Cutter asked for the transfer of Miss Clark from the Division of Botany to the Library to be Assistant Librarian. This appointment also was most fortunate for the development of the Library. Mr. Cutter and Miss Clark together reorganized the Library, introduced modern library methods, and established the library policies under which it has since been administered.

*While with the Division of Botany Miss Clark prepared a Systematic and alphabetical index of new species of North American Phanerogams and Pteridophytes which was published in the Contributions from the National Herbarium, volume 1, number 5. In 1893 she also started a card index of new genera and species of American plants, which index she carried on for ten years, when owing to many other duties she decided to hand over the work to the Gray Herbarium for continuance.

FREDERICK VERNON COVILLE - FRIEND OF THE LIBRARY
(continued)

Immediately after his appointment as Librarian, Mr. Cutter turned his attention to increasing the appropriation for the Library and in this was supported by the Secretary of Agriculture, J. Sterling Morton. In his report to the President for the fiscal year 1893 the Secretary requested an increase in the Library appropriation from \$3,000 to \$6,000. So great were its deficiencies that this increase which was provided in the Library's appropriation for the following fiscal year was far from adequate. As this was clearly recognized by Mr. Coville and keenly felt by him in the work of his division, he began (with the approval of Mr. Cutter) to work for additional funds for the purchase of books and periodicals in the appropriation for the Division of Botany. In transmitting to Secretary Morton his first report, for the period March-December 1893, Mr. Coville had made the following urgent recommendation:

"The Botanist desires here to urge the great necessity of much increased library facilities for the Division of Botany. It is especially desired that the books available for the use of this Division shall include a full series of publications devoted to the economic knowledge of plants, for, while the Division of Botany cannot from the limitations of its organization and appropriation undertake experiments in a very large number of subjects, it should be able at all times to furnish whatever information has been published upon these subjects. It is urged, therefore, that if the general appropriation for the library of the Department shall not be sufficiently increased for the purpose, that a special appropriation in accordance with the needs of the case shall be made available for the use of the Division of Botany for the purchase of these and other books now needed by that division."

In April, 1894, in the following letter to the Secretary, he amplified still further the need for improved library facilities:

"One of the deficiencies most keenly felt at present by the Division of Botany is the lack of a sufficient library. A nucleus of a good botanical library already exists in the Department and an examination of several of the larger libraries in Washington has disclosed an additional number of works devoted to botany, the use of many of which could without doubt be had by the Department of Agriculture under proper provisions for safe-keeping. In the present overcrowded and unsafe conditions of the Division, the Botanist has not thought it advisable to request the loan of such books. The Department of Agriculture should have a library in which accurate information regarding the vegetable resources of the world would be at all times accessible, but at present its library is deplorably deficient in this class of books....To bring about the desired result, I would urge that steps be taken at an early date to secure a suitable building....I estimate that it can be properly built and equipped for one hundred thousand dollars, and that five thousand dollars properly expended would bring the botanical library to a high standard of usefulness..."

FREDERICK VERNON COVILLE - FRIEND OF THE LIBRARY

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Such was the beginning of Mr. Coville's active support of the Library. During the fiscal years 1896 to 1906, the appropriations for his division contained authority for the purchase of books and periodicals for his division. No figures for the total amount expended for this purpose are available but it is certain that the sum spent each year amounted to at least several hundreds of dollars and that in some years it was a thousand. The additional botanical books which these funds enabled the Library to purchase contributed in very large measure to the building up of the collections in the field of botany and they were obtained much earlier and at lower prices than would have been possible if it has been necessary to await the time when they might perhaps have been purchased from the Library appropriation.

In all his book purchases Mr. Coville cooperated to the fullest extent with the Library, with Mr. Cutter until the latter's resignation as Librarian of the Department to accept a position in the Library of Congress, and afterward with Miss Clark who succeeded Mr. Cutter on January, 1901. The books purchased from the funds of the Division of Botany were treated no differently from those purchased from the Library funds. Mr. Coville never insisted that they be filed in his Division because they were purchased from its funds. In a letter to Dr. C. W. Dabney, then Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, on June 2, 1894, in regard to his inquiry as to why the Division of Botany was purchasing certain books, Mr. Coville replied as follows and what he wrote then was true throughout his association with the Library:

"This request for books was not intended to use any of the surplus appropriation of the Division of Botany, but was made because of urgent necessity in the Division of Botany for certain books which could not be purchased from the Library fund... It is by no means intended that any books purchased on requisition from the funds of the Division of Botany should be kept distinct as belonging to a division library. No such institution exists in the Division of Botany, and I am entirely opposed to the founding of one. All books purchased on the request in question would go through the customary routine of the general library."

It will be of interest here to give in Mr. Coville's own words later, two summaries of his efforts to increase the resources of the Library, for they show also the care with which the purchases were made. The first is from his report for the year 1905 and the second from his report for 1906:

"Due to the inadequate facilities in Washington for the botanical work of the Government, Congress made a special appropriation, several years ago in the agricultural appropriation bill for the purchase of necessary botanical works out of the funds for botanical investigations and experiments. Similar provision has been made annually. By this means the Department has been enabled to secure not only the current publications which are necessary to any botanical library but to purchase needed books, out of print and valuable, in such a way as to strengthen greatly the library facilities in Washington and make it possible for botanists employed by the

FREDERICK VERNON COVILLE - FRIEND OF THE LIBRARY
(continued)

Government as well as those visiting Washington and temporarily conducting investigations here to secure the books necessary for the proper completion of their researches. By a system of cooperative purchases between the Department of Agriculture, the National Museum, and the Library of Congress, the funds for botanical works at the disposal of these institutions have been used in such a way as to avoid duplication and to secure the most valuable books and those most needed in our botanical investigations. A continuance of the same procedure will ultimately result in the accumulation by the Government of a library which will be of inestimable service to botanical research throughout the United States.

"During the past year a plan* has been perfected to improve and enrich the botanical library facilities of the Government. The essential features of the plan are a joint catalogue of the botanical works in the various Government libraries of Washington, D.C., a joint purchasing arrangement between the libraries chiefly concerned, and a purchasing list of botanical works not in any of the Washington libraries but especially desired for reference. The libraries most actively interested in this plan are the Library of Congress (including the Smithsonian Deposit), the Library of the Department of Agriculture, and that of the National Museum. The plan has proved highly satisfactory, not only to the botanists who use the books but to the librarians who purchase and care for them. It prevents unnecessary duplication, is economical, promotes a knowledge of the books available, and gives a clearer idea of the books required. There is every probability that the plan will be extended to other departments of literature in the Government libraries."

The discontinuance in the fiscal year 1907 of the provision for the purchase of books and periodicals in the appropriation of the Division of Botany was apparently due to a conviction of the House Committee on Agriculture at that time that the appropriation of the Library of the Department should provide for the purchase of all books and periodicals for the use of the Department. Not only did the Committee omit the provision from the appropriation of the Division of Botany but also from that of the Weather Bureau.

*The plan to which Mr. Coville refers is probably that of a sub-committee on organization of Department libraries which was appointed in 1906 in connection with the Keck Committee on Department Methods. Mr. Coville served on this sub-committee as did also Miss Clark.

FREDERICK VERNON COVILLE - FRIEND OF THE LIBRARY

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The disallowance of Mr. Coville's book fund did not, however, deprive the Department Library of the invaluable aid furnished by his office in the selection and recommendation of books. Miss Marjorie F. Warner, who in February 1903 had been transferred, at Mr. Coville's request, from the Department Library to be Librarian of his office, under the "Literature of Botany" project, continued to advise and assist in the purchase of botanical publications until her connection with the project came to an end in 1922. When she returned in 1926 in another capacity, she was fortunately able to resume her former task in connection with the Library's purchases in certain lines and continued this work until her final retirement in 1934*. This assistance was very largely instrumental in building up the Department's remarkable collection of botanical literature and establishing an excellent basic collection of the classics of agriculture and materials for the study of its history. Thus, from the cooperation initiated by Mr. Coville over 40 years ago it has been possible for the Library to achieve in great measure the ideal he expressed in April 1894 of "a library in which accurate information regarding the vegetable resources of the world would be at all times accessible."

The "Literature of Botany" bibliographical project of Mr. Coville's office is generally referred to as having been formally initiated by him in the fiscal year 1896 when the purchase of books from the appropriation of the Division of Botany was first definitely authorized in the Department appropriation act. The "Botanical Catalogue", the nucleus of which was the botanical part of the catalogue of the Department Library, was not begun until February 1903, when Miss Majorie F. Warner became Librarian of his office.** In the course of Miss Warner's work the examination of titles with reference to the cooperative purchase of books among the different libraries necessitated some kind of a check list showing what books were already available and where located. Starting as a mere author list in cooperative book buying, it came to be generally consulted by workers in botanical lines and as it grew it became necessary to enlarge its scope in many ways. Because of other library duties, Miss Warner was able to devote only part of her time to the work on the catalogue. Therefore, in 1906, Mr. Coville decided to appoint an additional assistant for the work and requested the transfer of Miss Alice C. Atwood to the staff of his division with the particular task of developing the catalogue. From this period dates the beginning of the botanical subject catalogue. In the next two years rapid progress was made on its development.

*From 1923-1925, Miss Warner had leave of absence because of family responsibilities and in July 1934 she was obliged to resign on account of her health.

**The office had been previously moved from the old red brick Administration Building to 224 12th Street. The Division had also become a part of the Bureau of Plant Industry organized in 1901 by the consolidation of the Division of Botany, the Division of Vegetable Pathology and Physiology, the Division of Pomology, the Division of Agrostology, the Office of Superintendent of Gardens and Grounds, Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction, and the Congressional Seed Distribution. After consolidation with the Bureau of Plant Industry, Mr. Coville's office was known as Botanical Investigations and Experiments, later as Taxonomic Investigations, and still later as Office of Economic and Systematic Botany. There were also other transient changes in title. In 1934 his office was merged into the Division of Plant Exploration and Introduction.

FREDERICK VERNON COVILLE - FRIEND OF THE LIBRARY

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That Mr. Coville attached special importance to the bibliographical work carried on by his office is shown by the following quotation from a letter which he wrote to Dr. B. T. Galloway, Chief of the Bureau of Plant Industry, on November 11, 1907:

"In connection with the work of Taxonomic Investigations [the title of Mr. Coville's office at that time], it has been found necessary to develop a working collection of books bearing on this subject, for in this, probably more than in any other line of research in the Bureau, it is essential that works of reference be at hand and quickly accessible. In addition to collecting the available books, an attempt is being made to index botanical literature of all of the libraries in this city. This work is carried on under B. P. I. Project No. 381, 'The Literature of Botany'. We believe this undertaking is one of the greatest possible value to the entire Bureau, not only to those engaged in Taxonomic botany, but to all those engaged in research work with plants along any line, and we recommend that this project be liberally supported."

In 1908 there was what might be called a crisis in this undertaking. The bringing together in the West Wing of the various offices which had in 1901 been combined to form the Bureau of Plant Industry had made it desirable to have a library for the whole Bureau instead of separate libraries for the divisions as had been necessary as long as the divisions were separated in different buildings. Particularly was this true of the larger divisions, the Office of Botanical Investigations and Experiments, under Mr. Coville, and the Office of Vegetable Pathology and Physiology Investigations, under Dr. A. F. Woods. The Vegetable Pathology and Physiology Library in charge of Miss Eunice R. Oberly had developed an extensive special catalogue which was becoming increasingly important as a bibliographical tool in the subject of plant pathology, as was the Botanical Catalogue in the more general field of botany. It will be evident, therefore, that the decision of the administrative officers of the Bureau of Plant Industry to organize a bureau library created a difficult situation, not only from the point of view of personnel but also in regard to the planning of the related bibliographical projects of the two libraries. To the very great and lasting credit of all concerned, particularly Miss Warner, Miss Atwood, Miss Oberly, and Mr. Coville, there was finally worked out most amicably, co-operatively and entirely in the interest of the work, a plan which in the end resulted in the greater expansion and increased usefulness of both bibliographical projects.

In accordance with the plan decided upon, after the Bureau had appointed Miss Oberly as Librarian of the Bureau, Mr. Coville agreed to have the salaries of Miss Warner and Miss Atwood paid, as in the past, from the funds of his office, to have the Botany Catalogue moved to the new quarters of the Bureau library, along with the Plant Pathology Catalogue, and to have Miss Warner and Miss Atwood, as bibliographical assistants, carry on their work as a bibliographical adjunct to the work of the Bureau library. To make this possible, Miss Warner and Miss Atwood, with Mr. Coville's consent, were provided with quarters adjoining, and to all intents and purposes a part of, the Bureau library. Being freed from administrative duties, they were able to devote practically their full time to bibliographical work. With this arrangement and with the will to make it a success, Miss Warner, Miss Atwood and Miss Oberly

FREDERICK VERNON COVILLE - FRIEND OF THE LIBRARY
(continued)

made plans to operate the Bureau library as a unit and to combine their two catalogues into one. These plans, as far as the catalogue was concerned, were not fully accomplished until some years later because of the large amount of work involved in the revision of the two catalogues before they could be combined. Moreover, in the meantime other new special bibliographical projects were initiated in response to definite needs. Among these should be mentioned the systematic indexing of old scientific serials begun in 1911 by Miss Atwood, the compilation of a bibliography of horticulture for works published previous to 1800, which was begun by Miss Warner in 1912, the reclassification of the botanical portion of the Department Library, undertaken by Miss Warner and Miss Atwood in 1912-13, the indexing of illustrations of flowering plants begun by Miss Atwood in 1914, and the indexing of current botanical publications begun in 1914. It was therefore not until 1915 that the Botanical Catalogue and the Plant Pathology Catalogue were fully merged. The author entries of the two catalogues were combined in one alphabet but it seemed best to keep the subject catalogue in two parts, namely, botany in one part and plant pathology in the other part. It is on this same plan that the catalogues exist today.

In 1919 the Bureau Library was confronted by the problem of lessening the increasingly heavy circulation of current periodicals. One of the results of attempting to solve this problem was the issuance every two weeks in mimeographed form of a list of "Current Author Entries", consisting of the accumulation of the current indexing. This was initiated by Miss Oberly and was found to meet a real need. The title was later changed to "Botany Current Literature" and more recently to "Plant Science Literature". Miss Atwood is now responsible for the issuance of these lists and all the botanical entries in the lists are incorporated later in permanent form in the Botanical Catalogue.

In November 1921 the Library suffered a very great loss in the death of Miss Oberly but the Bureau library continued to be administered in the same cooperative spirit. In 1923 it seemed advisable to the Bureau of Plant Industry officials to give up the book collection kept in the Bureau library. Consequently, with Mr. Coville's consent the Botanical Catalogue was moved to the main Library and the library assistants were given office space near the catalogue. In 1932, when the main Library was moved to its present location in the South Building, the Botanical Catalogue was placed in the Public Catalogue Room next to the general catalogue of the Department Library, thus consummating Mr. Coville's cooperation with the Library. To the general catalogue of the Library, the Botanical Catalogue, which now comprises more than a half million cards, is an invaluable adjunct in the special field of botany and horticulture. It is not too much to say that it also stands as a monument to library cooperation in the Department. To the service of the Library it also has added valued prestige.

The liberal spirit in which Mr. Coville's bibliographical project was conceived appeared very early in his determination that books purchased with his funds should not be the sole property of his office but were to form part of the Department Library and be administered for the benefit of the Department. This same liberality was applied to the work of the bibliographical assistants on the project. In the words of Miss Warner, "they were accorded the utmost liberty in shaping their work to meet various needs as they arose. So far as the exigencies of the routine demands made it possible, Mr. Coville not only

FREDERICK VERNON COVILLE - FRIEND OF THE LIBRARY
(continued)

permitted but welcomed opportunities to give service outside of his office. This attitude enabled the bibliographical project to perform diversified and far reaching service and furnished an incentive for highly specialized bibliographical and historical research in the literature of plant science.

Mr. Coville evidently realized that such a project could not attain great usefulness without wide experience and opportunity and that its service should not, therefore, be limited to his own office but should be available to the entire Department and should respond as fully as possible to the ever increasing needs and developments of botanical science."

Mr. Coville continued his contributions to the financial support of the Botanical Catalogue up to 1931 when a rearrangement of Bureau funds made it seem desirable to have all expenses of the Bureau library, including the expenses of the catalogue and other bibliographical work, borne by the Bureau as a whole. The total amount which Mr. Coville's office spent in connection with the "Literature of Botany" project, including the amounts spent both for books and for salaries is believed to be fully \$100,000. If to this are added the generous contributions made by the Bureau of Plant Industry administrative office and other divisions of the Bureau in continuing and expanding this project, it will be evident how great is the Library's financial indebtedness to Mr. Coville and to the Bureau of Plant Industry as a whole. The value of this cooperation in terms of its benefits to the Library and its users it is impossible to estimate.

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